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ABSTRACT

The Educational Priorities Panel carried out a study of the first year of the class size reduction program for grades K-3 in the New York City public schools by visiting five schools throughout the city and interviewing the principal and at least two teachers involved in implementing the program at each school. In all, 17 interviews were conducted. This report is based on the accounts of these principals and teachers of the effects of smaller classes on their schools as well as test data from one school which indicated changes in student performance levels. On the whole, the class size reduction experience as reported by principals and teachers has been very positive. Teachers and principals have noted that students appear to learn faster and the quality of teaching appears to have been enhanced. Smaller classes allow teachers to do more frequent student evaluation and follow-up. Classroom participation and student enthusiasm appear to have increased. Fewer disciplinary referrals were made, and teacher morale improved. Some recommendations are made for strengthening the initiative, which appears to be a valuable reform and one that is focused on prevention instead of remediation. (SLD)

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Smaller is Better

First-hand Reports of Early Grade Class Size Reduction in New York City Public Schools

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Smaller is Better

First-Hand Reports of Early Grade Class Size Reduction in New York City Public Schools

Finally the children in a public school ... have a fair chance to succeed ... The government is investing in our schools the right way, providing the resources the children really need ... It should stay here forever. We have come so far to obtain this, it has been so long — we must keep it. It's the only way to guarantee success for our children. For decades it's been the thing we knew would make all the difference for our children, but I never thought I would live to see the day where it would actually happen. I feel honored that I've seen the day that I could provide these children with the appropriate resources they need to learn. Now, it should be expanded to all the schools in the city. All children in this city, this state, this country are entitled to the benefits of smaller classes. Speaking as an educator, it should not be a privilege, it should be a right.

— **Norma Genao,**
Principal, PS 185 in Manhattan
(Pictured on the cover with some students at her school.)

Educational Priorities Panel

Leonie Haimson, author

April 2000

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Executive Summary

The Educational Priorities Panel (EPP) has carried out a study of the first year of the class size reduction program for grades K-3 in the New York City public schools by visiting five schools throughout the city and interviewing the principal and at least two teachers involved in implementing the program at each school. All told, 17 interviews were conducted.

This report is based on the first-hand accounts by these principals and teachers of the effect of smaller classes on their schools as well as one school's test data indicating changes in student performance levels. The monitoring study was done after EPP had surveyed 18 community school districts to verify compliance with state and federal class size reduction regulations. Systemwide surveys of compliance have been conducted by the New York City Board of Education and, independently, by the United Federation of Teachers.

On the whole, the class size reduction experience as reported by principals and teachers has been overwhelmingly positive. They note the following changes in their schools as a result of the introduction of smaller classes:

- Many of the students placed in smaller classes appear to be learning faster this year compared to the year before, though all of the educators we interviewed stressed that it was still too early to make definitive judgments.
- The quality and quantity of teaching have been fundamentally enhanced, because smaller classes allow teachers to give more individualized attention to their students and utilize small group instruction more effectively.
- Smaller classes have allowed teachers to do more frequent student evaluation and follow-up.
- There is a heightened level of classroom participation this year, which has led to improvements in students' language and communication skills.
- Students display a greater enthusiasm for and initiative in reading this year, most likely due to their being placed in customized and smaller reading groups.
- There is a noticeable decline in the number of disciplinary referrals among students placed in smaller classes. One principal reported that suspensions at her school are down 60% from last year, which she specifically attributed to the class size reduction program.
- There is an upsurge in teacher morale that many expect will lead to significant decreases in staff turnover. In some schools, the smaller class sizes have also made it easier to hire more qualified and experienced teachers.
- Parent-teacher relationships have improved in some schools this year, leading to an overall increase in parental involvement in these schools.
- Smaller classes have proved especially valuable, since this is a reform that focuses on prevention rather than remediation, giving more children the opportunity to succeed in the first place rather than fail.
- We identified ways in which the initiative could be strengthened, particularly the floating teacher program, by contrasting how it is being implemented in two different schools. We found that floating teachers appear to be most successful when time is provided for training, coordination, and planning, and when they are not assigned to too many classrooms.
- In some schools inconsistencies in terms of grade level implementation and grouping could be redressed if there was more careful planning and assurances of continued funding for the program.

At this point, the New York City class size reduction program has every indication of success, and will most likely lead to significant improvements in student outcomes if the legislative support for this program is sustained and expanded.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The New York City public school system has long been plagued by its overly large classes. For many years, New York City students have been crammed into the largest classes in the state, averaging about 28 per class in the elementary grades, compared to 22 or fewer elsewhere. Research has shown that lowering class size, particularly in grades K-3, is the most effective way to boost student performance, narrow the achievement gap, and decrease the number of students who drop out of school or are held back. Research also shows that the benefits of being placed in a smaller class in the early grades continue through the high school years and beyond.

- This year, with the help of $110 million in state and federal funds, about 950 new, smaller classes in grades K-3 were created in the New York City public schools, with about 20 students per class.
- Since every new class created reduces the size of other classes in that grade, the Board of Education has calculated that state and federal aid combined has resulted in smaller classes for an estimated 30% of the students in grades K-3.
- These new, smaller classes were created in approximately 530 of the 675 New York City elementary schools. In many schools, classes were reduced in only one or two grades.
- Some of the federal funds have also been used to hire about 600 extra "floating" teachers in schools too crowded to create new classes. These teachers enter the regular classroom for a significant block of time each day in order to provide additional small-group instruction to students in reading or math.

Since the fall of 1999, the Board of Education has been collecting reports from community school districts on how many classes have been reduced and at what grade levels, how many schools have benefited, and how many schools have opted to use "floating" teachers. The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has conducted its own independent, internal survey of the state and federal class size reduction implementation to verify that these funds have been used appropriately. By December, EPP concluded its own independent survey of 18 district superintendents and business managers to get a school-by-school breakdown of the actual classes reduced and the number of schools that used federal funds for "floating" teachers. Our assessment is that the Board of Education has fully complied with state and federal regulations in the allocation of these funds.

This year, students are showing a greater enthusiasm for reading

By 2001, the New York State Legislature is supposed to fund the class size reduction program at $225 million. If this level of funding is fulfilled, it will represent the state's most significant contribution to high-needs school districts, since most of these dollars are to go to the large cities, where class sizes are the largest and student needs are the greatest overall.

Both the state and the federal government have made sizable investments toward providing smaller classes in our schools because research has shown that reducing class size, particularly in the early grades, significantly increases student achievement. Yet this is the first opportunity EPP has had to assess whether smaller classes do indeed make a difference in New York City public schools, and if so, why. With this objective in mind, the Educational Priorities Panel visited schools throughout the city to interview principals and teachers who are experiencing class size reduction for the first time.

We carried out 17 in-depth interviews at five schools currently implementing class size reduction. We interviewed the principal and at least two teachers at every school. Two of the schools were in Manhattan, and there was one in every other borough except Staten Island. The choice of schools was partly random and partly based on suggestions from superintendents. We ended up seeing a range of schools, some in overcrowded districts, and some in less crowded districts. Some of these schools were high achieving, and others were less so. Many different models of class size reduction were used in the various schools we visited.

Some of the principals we interviewed had used class size reduction funds to lower all of their class sizes in certain grades by a few students to 24 or less; others had used the funds to reduce only a few classes in selected grades to less than 20. Other principals had enough funds to reduce all their early grade classes to 18 or 20. Some of the schools we visited had floating teachers, while others did not. All in all, the sample we ended up with was highly differentiated and appeared to be broadly representative of schools where class size reduction is being carried out in the city as a whole.

There was also a wide range of experience among the educators we interviewed. The two newest principals had been in their jobs for almost three years, and the most experienced had been in the job for 10½ years, with a mean of seven years overall. The range among teachers was even wider, from two floating teachers who were new this year, to one classroom teacher who had been working for 29 years, with an overall mean among teachers of 12 years experience. This report is based on on-site interviews with these principals and teachers in February and early March 2000, using open-ended questions that could elicit both negative and positive responses.

EPP usually encounters a significant amount of criticism and frustration about new initiatives from staff at the school level. For this reason, our reports usually do not identify the individuals we interview. This is the first time EPP has encountered few, if any, reservations regarding a new initiative. All of those interviewed were unanimous in their praise for what smaller classes had done for their schools. Typical responses included the following superlatives: From a teacher in Queens, "It's ideal." From a principal in Brooklyn, "It's been incredible ... just phenomenal." A teacher in East Harlem, "It's been invaluable." A principal in central Harlem, "The government is investing in our schools the right way, providing the resources the children really need."

CHAPTER II

What changes class size reduction has brought to the classroom

The Tennessee and Wisconsin research studies on increases in student achievement from smaller class size are largely based on analyses of test results. With the exception of one New York City school that had testing data over several years, the reports of increased performance in this chapter are based on teachers' and principals' observations of improved learning in the classroom. From their accounts, EPP has attempted to identify some of the factors that may play a role in this increased student achievement.

Ivy Sherman, principal of PS 139 in Brooklyn, has seen her students' test scores soar as a result of smaller classes

Early signs of increased achievement

The most important change noted by principals and teachers was that the students placed in smaller classes seemed to be learning faster this year compared to the year before, though all of them stressed that it was still too early to make any definitive judgments. Carla Middough, a teacher of 18 1st graders at PS 185 in District 3 said, "My students have made a lot of progress since September. Many of them didn't know their alphabet, or their sounds; now a lot are beginning to pick up sight words. I've seen much quicker progress than the year before."

Dawn Steinberg, a 1st grade teacher at PS 139 in Flatbush, Brooklyn in District 22 reported that her students were able to "pick things up faster, and move faster through subjects" than when she had a larger class. At the same school, Bobbi Silverman, a Kindergarten teacher of an inclusion class with some special education children, is delighted with her students' progress: "They have excelled way beyond my expectations."

Lisa Goldstein, a teacher of 19 2nd graders at PS 198 in District 2 in Manhattan, when asked if she's seen benefits of the program in terms of student achievement, replied: "Absolutely. Almost all the kids are reading on grade level," compared to the six or seven who weren't the year before, when she had 29 in her class. " It's a huge difference; I can tell from my own sense and the running records we keep," she affirms. Though she emphasizes she has "no hard data as of yet," Gloria Buckery, the principal of PS 198, concurs: "We have some informal assessments that show our students are reading at a higher level ... The quality of their writing, the level of their literacy is improved." Peter McNally, principal of PS 229 in District 24 in Queens agrees: "Research shows and our limited experience from this year indicates that the productivity of the kids is much better ... the quality of their work [has] improved."

One principal that we interviewed did have statistics to back up her conviction that smaller classes have significantly boosted student performance at her school. PS 139 in Flatbush, Brooklyn in District 22 has a large and diverse student population of 1100, with a poverty level of 90%, and a large number of immigrant students who among them speak 51 languages at home. For the last three years, the school has also had smaller classes in Kindergarten and 1st grade, with twenty students per class, due to a district-wide initiative. When asked if she has seen benefits of the program in terms

of student performance, Ivy Sherman, the principal of PS 139 replied: "Absolutely; it's been reflected in our test scores, our class work, the students' writing. We're really meeting the standards, because our teachers are able to meet the children's needs." The result is that she's seen her students' test scores soar: "The first year I got here, [when class size reduction started], 48% of the 1st graders were meeting or exceeding their grade level on the California Achievement Test; last year it was 69%." The 2nd graders in her school, she noted, have made similar jumps in achievement, which she attributes directly to the class size reduction program, along with an increased emphasis on professional development and "balanced literacy."[1]

Factors leading to higher achievement

In our interviews, we were especially interested in finding out what it was about smaller classes that might lead to such improvements in student outcome. We discovered a number of factors that seemed to work synergistically to advance the learning experience in the classroom and the school as a whole.

1. More individualized attention leads to enhanced teaching

All of the interviewed teachers responded that the quality and quantity of their teaching had been fundamentally improved as a result of class size reduction. Each spoke at length about how having a smaller class had allowed them to give more individualized attention to their students. Most also mentioned that they relied increasingly on small group instruction and personal "conferencing," especially for reading and writing, in order to meet the new higher standards, and their ability to do so was now greatly facilitated. A typical response was that of Lisa Goldstein, the 2nd grade teacher at PS 198, a school that borders East Harlem in Manhattan. When asked what her experience has been teaching a class of 19 this year, compared to 29 the year before, Ms. Goldstein replied:

> It's made a world of difference ... I can meet with children on an individual basis and meet all their needs more effectively. During reading and writing times we conference with the kids, but I have time to see only four to five per day. I don't worry about the rest of the class during this time so much now that I have a smaller class. The children are easier to control, there are fewer distractions, and fewer kids disrupting what's going on. I can also meet with them more often individually compared to last year — about once a week compared to once every two weeks last year. It raises the quality of teaching. I'm not doing anything differently, but I can do it more often, and better.

Iris Pellot, 1st grade teacher at PS 139 in Flatbush, reported how with a smaller class there seemed to be more time in the day to cover more subjects and engage in more activities: "I can spend more time actually working with kids, see their work, check on its progress. And it takes less time to cycle through all the kids, so I can work with them individually more frequently."

Individualized attention is especially crucial in the early grades, as Maryann Wainstock, a Kindergarten teacher at PS 198 in District 2 points out. Ms. Wainstock, who has been in the profession for 24 years, explained: "Children come in to school at so many different levels. There are huge gaps in their abilities at this age. You have to teach each child individually, or teach them in small groups, and the more children you have the harder it is to reach all of them ... Particularly in Kindergarten, they come in with fewer skills; we have to touch each child, to show them how to hold a pencil properly, how to write. We need them close by. There's no way to do that with a large group."

Elizabeth Lutkowski, who teaches a 1st grade class of 17 students at PS 229 in Woodside Queens, describes other benefits of a smaller class: "As a teacher you can be more visual, more hands-on. The children can work with manipulatives more easily, and leave things set up in the corner, to come back to later ... They can also share much more easily. They've just made dioramas, and are sharing them in three groups. In a large group, there's so much time to wait. These things might not seem important, but they are."

Since their students are learning the basics more quickly, some teachers noted that they were able to cover more aspects of a topic. According to Ms. Steinberg, the 1st grade teacher at PS 139 in Brooklyn, she's been able to pursue "more lateral growth — to work on a different area of the topic, or a more challenging aspect of the same skill. Also, we can branch off into different tangents of the subject, depending on what they bring up in class and their inter-

[1] "Balanced literacy" is a process by which children experience reading and writing in many different ways, including learning skills and strategies through "shared" reading with a teacher, reading in small groups where teachers "guide" their reading, and reading and writing independently.

Carla Middough can do more ECLAS assessments of her first grade students

ests." Thus, her 1st graders are increasingly able to pursue their individual interests, do research on them, and report back to the class. Ms. Silverman, Kindergarten teacher at PS 139, described that since some of the children in her class have acquired the basic skills so quickly, now they "are working on poetry — they can go off on different tangents."

2. More frequent student assessment and follow-up

Many teachers said that having a small class allowed them to do the critical tasks of individual evaluation and follow-up more frequently. A great number of assessments, both formal and informal, are now mandated for New York City elementary students. One of the most important is the Early Childhood Literacy Assessment System, or ECLAS, that is supposed to be done at least twice during the year for early grade students. Some teachers we interviewed have added an additional mid-year ECLAS to their routine.

As Carla Middough, a teacher of a 1st grade class of 18 students at PS 185 in Harlem pointed out, because of the fewer number of students, "It's easier to break them up into small groups. We see them more often, can cycle through all the groups, and keep track of their progress better. We can do more ECLAS assessments. The first comes in November, the second usually in May. It has four components, and is very time-consuming. Now we've added a mid-year assessment."

Michelle McElhatton, a "floating" teacher who works with two 2nd grade classes at PS 280 in the Bronx, can complete more Developmental Reading Assessments (DRAs) with her students, another type of literacy assessment often used, because of the class size reduction program. She's also able to carry out "running records" more frequently, during which she counts exactly how many and what kind of mistakes they make while reading aloud to her: "I can keep my eyes on my students better and constantly check if they're understanding the material. I can check how many errors they're making, and think of strategies to deal with those errors."

As teachers track the progress of their students more closely, they can target those students with learning problems earlier, and deal with these problems more effectively. Ms. McElhatton concludes, "I really get to know the children one to one, what skills they lack, what they need. I have a plan for each child. ... It's easier to adjust to different learning styles with the smaller groups. I can identify and address their needs quicker."

3. Student language skills improved

In a smaller class, the communication skills of students are also enhanced because there is more opportunity for them to participate in classroom discussion. This in turn helps build their ability to read and write. According to Ms. Lutkowski of PS 229 in Queens, in a smaller class, students can "learn from each other better, they listen to the teacher better. They feel more free to offer their own views. Really, language is the basis of their problems ... and in a smaller class, we are encouraging interaction, speaking, and communication, all of which together is the basis for reading and writing."

Many other teachers noted an increased level of classroom participation in their smaller classes this year. Some attributed this to the closer bond that they were able to forge with their students. Nancy Napoli, a 3rd grade teacher at PS 280 in

Elizabeth Lutkowski, first grade teacher, observes that her students' communication skills are enhanced in a smaller class

the Bronx, explains that her students are "quick to show you they understand, because they're in a small group ... They're more eager to please me, because they're in a smaller class, and I'm able to get to everybody sometime during a period. A lot of kids are quiet and shy ... but now they aren't so quiet and shy anymore. They've come out of their shells, they're raising their hands, and eager to show me they know the answer — and that's because they're in a smaller class."

Maria Dockendorf, a teacher at PS 220 in Woodside, Queens, has seen a similar improvement occurring among her 18 3rd graders, many of whom were low-achieving:

> Originally, some of the children were afraid to ask questions. Now, they're all more comfortable. One was so timid, so afraid, he was reluctant to participate in the school storytelling contest, but now he's gone all the way to the district level in the competition, representing our school. So many of the children feel very insecure, they've failed so many times ... They need us to build them up, build up their confidence level before they can achieve.

4. More focused learning and student-teacher interaction

Many teachers and principals noted a radical change in the atmosphere of their schools, with more focused work going on in the classroom. Several independently pointed out that when children are taught in small groups, they appear to pay more attention to what is going on. Gloria Buckery, principal of PS 198, said: "They're able to use manipulatives more in math, and they're having conversations about the manipulatives ... The quality of the cooperative learning has improved. They're more focused on the task at hand." As Ms. McElhatton put it, "They're not distracted; they're really paying attention. I'm really getting through to them." In a smaller class, according to Maryann Wainstock of PS 198, the atmosphere is "calmer, much quieter ... [it's] academically sounder."

Teachers also stressed that the heightened interaction they experienced with their students this year was critical, given that many of these children came from homes where English was not the first language, or where parents worked in the evening or were busy dealing with other issues. As Ms. Middough, the 1st grade teacher at PS 185 in Harlem explained, "A lot of my students only have real contact with an adult ... in school. A lot of them have language barriers and they don't speak English, or their parents have language barriers. They need to have more help, more attention from their teacher as a result."

Lisa Goldstein of PS 198 in District 2 agreed: "Inner city kids need more than kids in the suburbs. They get less individual attention at home. The smaller the class size, the more we can give them." Norma Genao, principal at PS 185, sums it up best: "For too many of our students, their parents are working at night, or they're living with foster families or living with grandmothers. Their best chance for quality time with an adult is right here in school. How many children can a teacher see and attend to on a daily basis? How can a qualified teacher address the needs of 30 children in a class? They are doomed to failure."

5. Increased levels of student initiative in reading

The more accurate assessment that smaller classes allow, as well as the greater ability to form customized reading groups, has enabled teachers to place their students in reading groups that are at just the right levels — which leads to further gains in achievement. Again, as Ms. McElhatton points out, "I can choose literature that's just right for them. If I choose books that are too hard, they won't want to read them, they get scared. If I choose books too easy ... they'll get bored." Within the right, small group, "they can get books just right for them."

When placed in the appropriate reading group, students often seem to demonstrate a greater enthusiasm for reading. As Verlethia Cisse, a teacher at PS 185 in Harlem explains, when her 19 2nd graders "have reading groups that are really individualized and geared to their level ... they don't feel threatened. They're more comfortable, and participate more, which raises their confidence and self-esteem. Reading becomes tremendously gratifying and exciting to them — before it was not exciting. Now, they want to pick up books to read on their own, because of this confidence factor. I see them doing more independent reading. They show greater initiative, they even attempt harder books because they feel successful instead of defeated." Moreover, according to principal Norma Genao, "If you go into my classrooms, you see small classes, more space, an inviting and rich environment, with room for books, and the children's work on display. The children feel special and welcome, they feel 'I'm important, because look at the place I'm in!'"

6. Disciplinary referrals dramatically reduced

One of the consequences of smaller classes that we had not anticipated and that came up spontaneously in nearly every one of our interviews was their profound impact on the number of disciplinary referrals. Gloria Buckery, principal of

Principal Gloria Buckery reports that disciplinary referrals have dropped 60% this year at PS 198 in District 2

PS 198, reports that suspensions in her school are down fully 60% from last year, a huge drop that she attributes specifically to the class size reduction program. Ms. Genao, principal of PS 185, observed a similar improvement at her school: "Management is easier. When they [the students] play outside, they're calmer — you can see the difference. Even though there are more students than ever before, the playground is quieter. There are fewer discipline problems because their needs are being met in the classroom. They're not acting out as much; there's been a turnaround in their behavior. For the first time we have time to invest in the whole child, and relate to the child on all levels." Ms. Sherman, principal of PS 139 in Brooklyn also noted a reduction in behavior referrals, as did Peter McNally, principal of PS 229 in Queens.

Teachers cited many reasons for the sharp decline in behavior problems, which they linked to smaller classes. One explanation was that when students are more engaged in classroom activities, they are less apt to cause disruptions. As Dawn Steinberg of PS 139 in Brooklyn explained, "If you have a child with a disciplinary problem, you can get on top of it faster and help that child get through it, by altering their way of dealing with it. You can rechannel children's attention towards a different avenue, and get them to refocus their energies on the work, instead of acting out." Another possible reason mentioned is that in a smaller class, as Verlethia Cisse explains, children "look at each other more as family, and they connect to each other."

Finally, with smaller classes, there is more space for students to move around the room without bumping into one another, a frequent occurrence in the city's typically overcrowded classrooms, which often leads to fights. One teacher has seen deterioration in this regard as her enrollment has crept upward from 20 to 23 over the course of this year: "Now ... it's more crowded on the rug, the lines are longer. They're pushing each other more ... there's more behavior problems."

Of course, as disciplinary problems are reduced, the time for teaching is increased, which leads to further academic advances — triggering a positive feedback. As Ms. Buckery points out, "Smaller classes make classroom management easier, and that lessens interference for kids to progress ... when you're not coping with behavior problems, more energy can go into instruction." Ms. Cisse, 2nd grade teacher at PS 185 concurs that this year, "I spend more time on teaching, less on classroom management."

7. Smaller classes leading to higher morale among teachers

Another beneficial effect of class size reduction has been an upsurge in the level of morale among teachers. Ms. Buckery reports: "For the first time, no new teacher has broken down crying in my office. It's always happened in the past. You could see the lack of morale among the teachers. Now what's being asked of them is realistic."

Especially with the new learning standards, the pressure on teachers has become immense, as Norma Genao, principal of PS 185 pointed out: "The main concern every teacher should have is instruction, not management. When you have overcrowded classes, management comes first, unfortunately, and instruction comes second. Now they also have preparation, planning, and new standards to live up to, there are no excuses. They are all accountable. This adds to the stress."

Ms. Genao revealed that her teachers have made additional contributions to the improvement of the school as a result of their more positive attitude this year: "The teachers have created handbooks for the staff, and another one for the parents. Because they are not overwhelmed and frustrated, they can be more creative and more productive." Ivy Sherman, principal of PS 139 in Brooklyn, also notes that teacher participation has grown because of class size reduction: "In some schools, it's hard to get teachers to work in the after-school program, because they're so tired, so burned-out after

the end of the day. Here we have 36 teachers working in our after-school program."

8. Less staff turnover and easier recruitment expected

Many principals we interviewed independently predicted that the significant improvement in teacher morale resulting from class size reduction will likely lead to less staff turnover at their schools. Teacher turnover is a chronic problem in New York City, where according to the UFT, 55% of teachers leave after only five years — double the national average. Norma Genao, principal of PS 185 described the phenomenon this way:

> With my teachers I was always concerned about burnout. I was a teacher myself and knew how difficult it was having 25 to 30 students ... In this school the staff turnover used to be tremendous; it was in part because they had so many kids, they were doomed to failure and no one wants to fail. Now, my teachers are happy. They are enjoying the art of teaching again. Sometimes, I felt like we were all on an assembly line. Now we can feel satisfaction, because we have results and can accomplish our goals.

Gloria Buckery, principal of PS 198, agreed: "New teachers are frequently overwhelmed, and this [smaller classes] would help ensure that their classroom experience was positive, leading them to stay on longer in the profession and develop their skills more."

Ivy Sherman, principal of PS 139 in Brooklyn, which has benefited from smaller classes for almost three years, confirmed that teacher turnover has diminished as a result: "We've had very little staff turnover — only one teacher has retired since I've been here, and she was ill."

Several teachers independently confirmed these principals' expectations. Dawn Steinberg, an experienced teacher of 31 years at PS 139 explained: "When you're dealing with smaller classes, you can defuse the discipline problems more easily, and that's a large part of the daily stress a teacher faces ... I feel a great weight, a pressure lifted off my back. I'm not hitting my head on the wall. I think it's going to reduce burnout dramatically, and allow teachers to stay in the profession longer. I know it'll tempt me to stay longer."

Lisa Goldstein of PS 198 went as far as to say that she would not remain teaching in the New York City public school system if the program was discontinued: "Now that I've seen the difference a small class makes, I don't want to go back to being a policeman. It would be impossible for me to go back to the old way. If the program disappeared, I'd go elsewhere — I wouldn't keep teaching in a city public school, I'd teach where classes are smaller. Whatever money I was offered, it's just not worth it."

Lisa Goldstein would leave teaching at PS 198 if her class became too large again

One of the arguments frequently made by opponents of class size reduction is that it will lead to an influx of unqualified, inexperienced teachers, particularly in schools that are already hard-to-staff. None of the principals mentioned this as a problem. Instead, Norma Genao, principal of PS 185 in Harlem, found that it was much easier to fill the numerous openings she had, even among applicants who had already taken other jobs, because she could promise them smaller classes. Indeed, as a result of this highly attractive incentive, she was able to draw more qualified candidates to teach in her school, including many with master's degrees and a greater experience level.

All in all, our interviews revealed that providing smaller classes may in the end be one of the most effective ways to bring qualified and experienced teachers into New York City public schools, and ensure they remain working longer once they have entered the system.

9. Improved parent-teacher relationships

At the schools implementing class size reduction, this year has also seen a change in the relationships between parents and staff, according to some of the educators we interviewed. As Gloria Buckery, principal of PS 198 in District 2

observed, "Teachers have more time to tell parents the positive things their children are doing rather than only focusing on the negative. Positive interaction is happening as well." Iris Pellot, 1st grade teacher at PS 139 in Flatbush, Brooklyn pointed out that with a smaller class, "It seems easier to communicate with parents ... I have more time to engage parents in what's going on the classroom."

Principal Norma Genao has noticed greater parental participation at PS 185 as well: "There's been ... an improvement in terms of the atmosphere of the school. It's more relaxed, we're all more comfortable and confident and proud, and parents feel that and it reflects in our relationships with them. Parent involvement has been the greatest this year than I've ever known it, in the almost 20 years I've been involved in the school. There are more parents volunteering in the lunchroom, there are more teachers volunteering to give parent seminars at night."

The program has even brought changes to parent-teacher night. Some teachers noted that this year they had time to correct homework in more detail, and fill out report cards in more depth. As Lisa Goldstein pointed out, "I'm not spreading my efforts so thinly. I can focus on each person's work in a more concentrated way." Michelle McElhatton, the floating teacher at PS 280 in the Bronx, is able to graph each student's progress in color on the Developmental Reading Assessment, which she and the regular classroom teacher then present to parents on parent-teacher night. Even the parent-teacher conferences can be longer, because of the smaller number each teacher has to see overall. As Ms. Goldstein added, "It's made a huge difference doing parent/teacher conferences; I can take 15 minutes with each, instead of 10 minutes."

10. More collaboration between teachers

Yet another ancillary benefit of the program noted by some of those we interviewed is the greater degree of collaboration among teachers this year, particularly in schools with floating teachers. As Gary LaMotta, principal of PS 280 in the Bronx explained, "Relationships have been forged between teachers, leading them to share among themselves, because of the new support teacher." Michelle McElhatton, the floating teacher interviewed at PS 280, mentioned this advantage as well: "It's great to be able to talk and plan with the other teachers. Three heads are better than one. We get ideas from each other, and go to each other for help." Bobbi Silverman, a Kindergarten teacher at PS 139 in District 22 in Brooklyn sees great benefits flowing to her students as a result of the additional teacher who comes in for half of each day: "They get to learn things a different way, two different versions of teaching the same skills. It's so rewarding — I'm banging my head against the wall, and then the kids get so excited with the fresh approach from a new teacher."

Carla Middough, a 1st grade teacher at PS 185 in Harlem, remarked that even in a school without floating teachers, "we can better discuss our children's problems among the teachers and brainstorm together" — since each teacher has fewer students overall. "Especially with the holdovers, it's easier to discuss their needs with their teachers from last year," according to Ms. Middough.

Peter McNally, principal of PS 229 in Queens, commented that his inclusion, reduced-size 1st grade class, taught by Elizabeth Lutkowski, has become something of an example for the school — one that other teachers have been able to learn from. He explained: "Ms. Lutkowski has been able to do so many creative things in her classroom in terms of grouping and skill development that other teachers in the school have been able to observe and model their techniques after her." According to Mr. McNally, especially noteworthy has been Ms. Lutkowski's ability to carry out small-group instruction and more continuous assessment and remediation with her "high-risk" students.

Program likely to lead to fewer special education referrals

Another strength of the program is the enhanced ability for teachers to address the needs of children with learning problems in a regular class. Individual intervention is especially important for these students, so that they do not have to be referred to special education or be taught in a self-contained classroom. As Ms. Lutkowski pointed out, without the special help a small class affords them, some of her "high-risk" students "might be the ones who fall by the wayside in a regular class." Not only has the smaller class made it easier for her to work effectively with these children, but she has found that her students actually treat each other better as a result: "These are all children with very different abilities, many of them resource room kids. They never make fun of each other. With a big class size, it's much harder to intervene as quickly, and control the group the way you want it to go. These children are so very kind to each other; it's a very caring group, and the smaller size allows for that."

Verlethia Cisse, teacher at PS 185 in Harlem, pointed out, "Each child has different needs, some have self-esteem problems. We can address these quicker, and don't let them fall through the cracks. Before we used to wonder, 'what's wrong with so and so?' But we didn't really have time to find out." Norma Genao, principal of PS 185, agreed that as a result of the class size reduction program, special education referrals would likely fall, since student "needs can be better addressed in the regular classroom."

As Bobbi Silverman, teacher of an inclusion Kindergarten with a number of special needs children at PS 139, explained, "We deal with a lot of emotional problems, kids with a lot of baggage. In a smaller class, you can center on these problems quicker, to sound out what's going on." Ivy Sherman, principal of PS 139 corroborated that there has been a drop in special education referrals, both in her school and district-wide, since the class size reduction started in District 22 three years ago.

Because of her smaller class, Verlethia Cisse is better able to make sure that none of her 3rd graders "fall through the cracks"

PREVENTION RATHER THAN REMEDIATION STRESSED

According to the teachers and principals we interviewed, class size reduction is an especially valuable development within the New York City public school system, because unlike many of the other changes introduced over the last few years, such as after-school programs, summer sessions, and an end to "social promotion", this reform focuses primarily on prevention rather than remediation. As Principal Buckery of PS 198 in District 2 put it, "We don't want students to fail, but when they do we try to help them with a lot of remedial efforts. It's better to help them succeed in the first place."

Maryann Wainstock, Kindergarten teacher at PS 198, agreed: "For years I've been saying that the largest problem with the public schools was overly large classes. For me that is the most important thing — smaller classes are better than having push-in teachers or special programs. With a smaller class, you can get to the children who need it, particularly in early childhood."

Several of those we interviewed brought up the fact that this year, the class size reduction program had allowed them to provide their students with something closer to a high-quality private school experience. Not only do private schools usually have smaller classes, but unlike the public schools in New York City, they are often designed and given the resources to maximize their students' chances for academic success. In addition, children who go to private schools are usually treated as though they are special, as though they mattered. As Ms. Lutkowski of PS 229 in Queens said, who herself taught in private schools for 10 years, now she is able to provide a learning environment that is "ideal, like a private school education. They get all the extras, including time to share ideas between themselves. All of the children get a turn."

As Norma Genao said, "Give me all the money you want, the materials, and the services, but the most important key factor is quality time with a teacher, and that depends on reduced class size. Now, sometimes I honestly feel we're running a private school here. When I talk about a private school, I mean ... where everything is geared toward success ... You are truly being accountable in providing a meaningful, appropriate, and effective education to each child. Not just the kids who would make it anyway, as in the survival of the fittest."

CHAPTER III

How the program could be strengthened

We did find a few problems with the way some schools were implementing the class size reduction initiative. One of these pertains to the floating teacher program, at least as it is being carried out in some of the schools we visited.

Lessons from the floating teacher program

The floating teacher program was designed for those schools that were too overcrowded to create additional classes to reduce class size. Here, extra teachers have been hired to go into the regular classroom to provide small group instruction on a daily basis to students in literacy and math. There appears to have been a lot of flexibility given to different districts and even within districts on how best to implement this program. Though the program appeared to be highly successful in some schools, as in PS 280 in District 10 in the Bronx, the same was not true of another school we visited, in a different district.

At the other school, an inexperienced first year teacher was hired two days before classes began, and without adequate training and time to coordinate her role with other teachers, was thrust into five classes to work with some of the slowest learners in each class. The understandable result is that she feels frustrated and that she doesn't "belong anywhere." She hopes not to continue in this job in the future, and rather to get her own classroom instead.

On the other hand, the "floating teacher" at PS 280 in District 10 had an entirely different experience. Though Michelle McElhatton admitted that initially she had been disappointed that she did not get her own class and was extremely apprehensive, now she is thrilled with what she's been able to achieve so far: "I love it. It's been a great experience. At first I was scared to have to specialize in literacy, as a first year teacher. I wanted my own classroom. But because of all the support and training, I've learned so much. I want to stick with it; I hope they have this position next year. I've gotten so much better at it."

We learned the following lessons, from looking at the way in which this program was functioning in these two different schools:

- **Provide enough training and professional development.** All new teachers need extensive training and support, and most of the floating teachers that were hired seem to be new teachers. Professional development is especially crucial for these particular neophytes, since they are supposed to focus their efforts on literacy and are often given the most difficult and problematic group in the classroom to teach. In District 10, all of the floating teachers received special training from the district over the summer, according to Gary LaMotta, the principal of PS 280, and continue to receive additional support from district staff developers who regularly come into the school during the year.

According to Michelle McElhatton, the floating teacher at PS 280, "The staff development has been excellent; its helped me learn how to plan, how to be more organized, how to do the DRA [Developmental Reading Assessment], how to determine their reading levels, how to meet the kids' needs." As a result, she said "I've been able to break up my small group into two, even smaller groups, and I'm seeing results. Most of them have moved up into a faster reading group already." On the other hand, at another school, the floating teacher who was hired two days before school began received no preparation in advance and the only training she had during the fall was designed for 5th grade teachers, while she teaches 3rd grade students.

- **Incorporate adequate time for coordination and planning.** From our two contrasting schools, it was apparent that there must be careful planning to ensure that the floating teacher has time built into her schedule to coordinate her activities with the teachers of the other classes that she works with. At PS 280 this was done, in part, by making sure that they all had a common preparation period. According to Ms. McElhatton, "We all have a common prep, we plan activities and discuss our students. We also talk after school; it's very helpful to get different perspectives." At the other school we visited, there was no time set aside for the floating teacher to plan her role with the regular classroom teachers. As she

explained, "There's little or no time for planning. I often have to switch roles and tasks at the last minute. I get little time to talk to each teacher individually."

- **Resist the temptation to spread the floating teacher too thinly.** Of course, the fewer classrooms a floating teacher is assigned to, the easier planning and coordination will be. The teacher's ability to get to know the students in these classes is considerably expanded the more time she or he can spend with each. The program as implemented at PS 280 does this by having Ms. McElhatton assigned to only two 2nd grade classes, where she works with the same reading groups each morning, and in the afternoon with the same groups for math. She can also talk to the parents of her students along with the regular classroom teacher on parent-teacher night, where they discuss student progress in reading, illustrated by color graphs of their DRAs.

On the other hand, the floating teacher in the other school was assigned to five different 3rd grade classrooms, so she never had enough time to get to know her students well, never had the opportunity to coordinate her responsibilities with their different classroom teachers, and never was able to attend parent-teacher conferences. Though we understand the motivation of the principal who wanted to provide as much help as he could to each of his 3rd grade classes, he himself admitted that if he had to do it over again, he would have devoted all his funds towards creating smaller classes rather than hiring floating teachers, "because in this situation the teacher will be responsible for her own students." In the end, he argued, this would work better both for the teachers and the parents, who often do not know which teacher to talk to about their children's education.

Enrollment creep

In a few schools we visited, some classes that began with 20 or fewer students had increased in size over the course of the year until they were much larger than originally planned. One Kindergarten teacher, who had 18 students at one point during the year and now had 23, revealed how this growth in enrollment, due to more children entering the school midyear, had entirely altered the atmosphere of her classroom. Before, "the atmosphere in class was more congenial, more cooperative, more relaxed ... it's a homier, more nurturing setting when a child can be given more attention." Now, there were many more behavior problems among her students, and she found herself much less "able to reach her children individually." Before, reading groups were "manageable," with four to five children in each group. Now, she felt that she was unable to give the children as much individual instruction as they needed, particularly the slowest readers who needed her help the most.

Space constraints

Of course, space limitations in many schools prevent principals from simply forming new classes. Nevertheless, all the principals we interviewed said they would welcome the expansion of the program, and had potential strategies for utilizing extra teaching positions if they were to come their way. This was true even of those whose schools were over 100% capacity, such as Ivy Sherman, principal of PS 139 in District 22. If she received more positions for next year, Ms. Sherman said she would make more space by moving at least one of her pre-K classes out of the building, with the permission of her superintendent. (The official goal of the New York City Board of Education is to have 75% of its pre-K programs placed outside of school buildings, to be run by neighborhood preschools and community based organizations.)

Gloria Buckery, principal of PS 198 in District 2, would "squeeze" more of her staff specialists into smaller rooms, and have her cluster teachers travel from class to class. Gary LaMotta, principal of PS 280 in the very overcrowded District 10, would ask permission from his superintendent to let him use some of the classrooms in the middle school annex next door. As Norma Genao, principal of PS 185 in District 3 put it, to create smaller classes, she would do "anything. The essence of a school is a classroom teacher with those kids in her class, and as a principal I have to facilitate what makes this work ... There's always a way to get to your goal, if you try hard enough."

Given space constraints, the floating teacher model could be utilized more widely throughout the city, especially as it was implemented in District 10. Nevertheless, there will undoubtedly have to be an expansion of classroom space in many districts for real class size reduction to be brought to all the children who need it throughout the city.

Implementation by grade level inconsistent

Another related problem that we noted was an inconsistency across schools as to which grade level classes are first being reduced. Research shows that the greatest and most lasting benefits result from first providing smaller classes to Kindergarten students and 1st graders, and then making sure

these students remain in smaller classes for at least three years. Indeed, the instructions from the Chancellor's office of the New York City Board of Education were explicit that where there was room to create more classes, schools should do so first for Kindergarten, then 1st grade, etc.

Yet some of the schools we visited instead appeared to have formed smaller classes for their 2nd and 3rd graders before their younger students. And while principals had different explanations for their decisions, including an understandable desire to give extra help to some of their 2nd and 3rd graders at risk of being held back, it was also likely that they are responding to the immediate pressure to make sure their students do well on the 3rd and 4th grade tests.

Again, this is also understandable — but regrettable. On the whole, research is at best equivocal as to whether there are benefits for students who are placed in smaller classes for only one year, as late as the 2nd or 3rd grade. The best long-term strategy to avoid the problem of children performing below grade level is to provide them with smaller classes as early in their educational careers as possible, and to keep them in smaller classes for at least three years.

SMALLER CLASSES SHOULD NOT BE USED AS REMEDIATION

An unfortunate occurrence we noted at some schools was that especially where class size reduction funds were limited, smaller classes were provided only for the most "at-risk" children. This follows a pattern that is prevalent in the resource-strapped New York City school system: children who fall behind and fail to flourish in overly large classes are then relegated to the "slow class" or pulled out for remediation sessions with paraprofessionals or teacher specialists. The smaller class size program, on the other hand, is an opportunity to prevent children from becoming "at-risk" in the first place.

State Education Department regulations require that the lowest-performing schools receive class size reduction funds on a priority basis so that more students in these schools could begin to perform at grade level. They did not require that these funds be used to target their lowest-achieving students. As many children as possible in the early grades should be the beneficiaries of a better classroom environment and more individual attention from a classroom or floating teacher. If a systemwide pattern develops where most schools create smaller class sizes only for "at-risk" students, this initiative will become just one more remediation strategy, such as special education "Resource Rooms," and will fail to achieve the results documented in the Tennessee and Wisconsin studies. The long-term goal should be that all students in the early grades have smaller class sizes. Inevitably, there will be some children who still need intensive intervention through a variety of services, but there will be significantly fewer numbers who need this extra help.

In addition, the program should not be used as a convenient excuse to take low-achieving students out of a heterogeneous class where they might otherwise benefit from contact with higher-achieving peers. Worse still, in schools where ability grouping is practiced in the 2nd and 3rd grades, smaller class sizes for "at-risk" students could push this "tracking" down to the Kindergarten and 1st grades.

CHAPTER IV

Conclusion: The need for continuity in planning and funding

All this underscores the need to make sure that the financial support for this program is continued and expanded as originally planned. Otherwise, with the limited and uncertain funding stream that now exists, some schools will undoubtedly continue giving smaller classes to their children only in the Kindergarten and 1st grades, and other schools to their 2nd and 3rd graders, with no chance of the sustained and progressive implementation that only three years in a smaller class will provide.

Under the combined pressures of limited resources and higher standards, other schools will continue to make the Hobson's choice of providing smaller classes to only their most underachieving and "at-risk" children, rather than helping to ensure that all children succeed in the first place. Indeed, it would be tragic to throw any of these children, after only one year of a closely attentive environment where they have begun to thrive, back into the Darwinian world of oversized classes where only the fittest survive.

There is no reason for the partisan battling that has occurred over the last two years, in which the class size reduction program has become a bargaining chip between the Governor and the New York State Legislature. To the contrary, across the rest of the country, there has been remarkable bipartisan agreement that class size reduction is the one of the most effective ways to improve schools. Republican governors, including Lamar Alexander, who pioneered the STAR study in Tennessee, Pete Wilson of California, and many others have championed efforts to reduce class size in their states. Throughout the country, reducing class size has been shown to be a potent method to raise student performance, begin to close the achievement gap, and make sure that funds go straight to the classroom where they belong.

Indeed, all of the principals and teachers we interviewed urged that support for the class size program should be continued and expanded. As Gloria Buckery, principal of PS 198 in District 2 pointed out, "We know it's good, why should it only be provided for a small percentage of the population? You should really do it for all the children." Especially now, with the need for students to achieve the new higher learning standards, they agreed that smaller classes are more important than ever. Gary LaMotta, principal of PS 280 in the Bronx explained, "The demands of the curriculum, the explosion of information, and the standards all speak to the need for smaller class size and additional support. The bar has been raised."

As for the floating teacher program, it too should be extended, as Michelle McElhatton of PS 280 said: "Every teacher always can use an extra teacher in the room to help out, especially with the at-risk kids. And with the lower grades — they're so needy and so young. The teacher can't run around with 28 kids and meet all of their needs at the same time."

Norma Genao, principal of PS 185 in Harlem put it best: "Finally the children in a public school ... have a fair chance to succeed ... The government is investing in our schools the right way, providing the resources the children really need ... It should stay here forever. We have come so far to obtain this; it has been so long — we must keep it. It's the only way to guarantee success for our children. For decades its been the thing we knew would make all the difference for our children, but I never thought I would live to see the day where it would actually happen. I feel honored that I've seen the day that I could provide these children with the appropriate resources they need to learn. Now it should be expanded to all the schools in the city. All children in this city, this state, this country are entitled to the benefits of smaller classes. Speaking as an educator, it should not be a privilege, it should be a right."